

H. Knox Thames Remarks

U.S.
Strategic Dilemmas in Uzbekistan
and Turkmenistan
Briefing at CSIS

July 27, 2005

H. Knox Thames: Good afternoon. My name is Knox Thames. I work for the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, a congressionally created bi-partisan commission that promotes human rights and democratization in the 55 participating States of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Our current chairman is Senator Sam Brownback, a Republican from Kansas, and our co-chairman is Congressman Christopher Smith, a Republican from New Jersey.

I want to thank the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and CSIS for convening this timely event and inviting me to speak. I also want to note that the views I express today are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Government, the Commission, or of any individual Commissioner.

More than thirteen years after independence, the five countries of Central Asia are struggling in varying degrees with their transition from Soviet authoritarian rule to democratic societies that fully respect human rights and uphold their freely undertaken OSCE commitments and other international obligations. During this same period, as we all know, the United States has become increasingly engaged with these countries politically, economically and militarily. This afternoon I will discuss a recent congressional initiative towards the region and my spring trip to Turkmenistan.

Central Asia Democracy and Human
Rights Act (HR 3189)

On June 30, Congressman Chris Smith, Co-Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, introduced legislation to withhold American aid to the governments of Central Asia that fail to democratize and respect human rights, while focusing foreign assistance on related civil society activity. The bill, HR 3189, is called the Central Asia Democracy and Human Rights Act (CADHRA) of 2005.

While this legislation was introduced about six weeks after the events in Andijan, Commission staff had been developing and fine tuning the draft for several months. Despite the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, the general trends are negative - Andijan is a symptom of what is wrong in the region after almost 15 years of independence.

The fact that five countries of Central Asia are still struggling in their transition to democracy and respect for human rights so long after the fall of communism is the driving force behind creating legislation to encourage change. We also want to avoid policies that bolster authoritarian governments which suppress and terrorize their own people, as it will be ultimately self defeating, as repression often breeds extremism and terrorism. To advance fundamental freedoms, we believe the United States should use every means at its disposal to encourage real reform, which ultimately promotes long-term stability and security in the region and supports American values. That is the objective of the legislation.

We are not alone in our views - in his second inaugural address President Bush stated, "It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."

Other influential bodies have made similar statements. The Final Report of the 9/11 Commission stated, "One of the lessons of the long Cold War was that short-term gains in cooperating with the most repressive and brutal governments were too often outweighed by long-term setbacks for America's status and interests."

Also, the September 2004 Final Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication stated, "The perception of intimate U.S. support of tyrannies in the Muslim World is perhaps the critical vulnerability in American strategy. It strongly undercuts our message, while strongly promoting that of the enemy."

CADHRA fulfills basic U.S. principles, but is also pragmatic. It anchors U.S. foreign policy towards the region in respect for democracy and human rights by providing carrots to stimulate good behavior and significant sticks for recalcitrant countries. At the same time, the Act recognizes the geo-strategic value of these countries by implementing aid reductions over a series of years and not immediately.

CADHRA Components

The Central Asia Democracy and Human Rights Act first provides \$188 million to encourage free and fair elections, the full respect for all human rights, including development of rule of law, prevention of torture, the end of human trafficking, freedom of expression and the media, and freedom of religion.

Second, the Act requires a report on assistance explaining the types and amount of defense articles and services and the amount of financial assistance provided to Central Asian governments, as well as the use of such assistance by the security services.

Third, the bill authorizes \$15 million in support for radio broadcasting to the countries of Central Asia that will facilitate the unhindered dissemination of information in the region.

Lastly, CADHRA establishes a new determination system that conditions all non-humanitarian assistance to each government on the President certifying that the country is making "substantial, sustained and demonstrable progress toward democratization and full respect for human rights." The five criteria to determine aid eligibility are: 1) democratization, 2) the protection of press and speech freedoms, 3) freedom of religion and assembly, 4) the establishment and enforcement of legal prohibitions against torture, and 5) the maintenance of the rule of law, including prohibitions against discrimination, corruption and human trafficking.

If the President cannot certify, U.S. assistance would be reduced by 33% for each year a positive determination cannot be made. After three consecutive negative determinations, all aid to that government would be discontinued, unless the President restores 33% on national security grounds. Assistance can be restored over a three-year period if a country is certified to be making progress on democratization and human rights.

CADHRA is a comprehensive approach, as withheld funds are redirected towards democratization and human rights projects. Monies are not lost, but reallocated for use by civil society.

Notably, the ban on non-humanitarian aid would include military assistance. We believe the ban on military aid is critical. These governments must understand that they jeopardize the full spectrum of their relationship with the United States when they fail to respect human rights.

The bill has been well received by the NGO community, as it provides a long-term framework for U.S. engagement in the region. We are currently in the process of gathering cosponsors and Rep. Smith intends to try to move it

after the August recess. Several Senate offices are considering sponsoring the Senate version.

Turkmenistan

Concerning Turkmenistan, my spring visit confirmed that the picture painted by NGOs concerning the level of repression is generally true. Virtually all freedoms are curtailed or denied in some way. Despite President Niyazov personally signing the Helsinki Accords after independence, there are no political freedoms, and other freedoms are drastically restricted, such as freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion. In my personal opinion, I cannot see how Turkmenistan would pass the CADHRA threshold if it were enacted today.

I was able to meet with a variety of religious groups and NGOs, as well as visit the parliament, government officials and meet with Foreign Minister Meredov. Discussions mainly focused on registration of NGOs and religious groups, as well as the ability of religious groups to rent facilities. I also discussed with Turkmen officials the possibility of being designated a Country of Particular Concern for severe violations of religious freedom if concrete progress is not made.

In Ashgabat, the vast building campaign continues - 12 story tall white marble condominiums are springing up throughout in place of leveled neighborhoods. However, due to their expense, occupancy is quite low, which is evident at night when the buildings stand completely dark. A manmade river is under construction, as well as a theme park near the former grounds of the destroyed Adventist church. I also visited the remains of three mosques that had recently been bulldozed to the ground, two for no apparent reason. I was not permitted by the government to visit functioning mosques, other than the gigantic Gipchak mosque in the president's home town.

I was surprised that recently released "Failed States Index" by Foreign Policy magazine did not list Turkmenistan, while all its neighbors fell into one of their three categories, "Critical," "In danger," and "Borderline."

The editors apparently found Turkmenistan unbefitting, despite that the government sits gingerly atop the pedestal of Niyazov without any line of succession. When he leaves the scene, the country will most likely be thrust into disarray and chaos. Considering this and that Turkmenistan represents one of the worst situations for human rights and democratization in the entire 55 nation OSCE region, the United States should warily approach any increase in engagement.

Conclusion

The crisis in Andijan should serve as a warning, first to the regime of President Islam Karimov and other Central Asian leaders to reform, but also to the international community to act, as these basic fundamental freedoms must be respected or this volatile region will destabilize further. As the events in southern Uzbekistan show, violence will result if serious steps are not taken to move these governments away from despotic authoritarian actions, towards reform, democratization and respect for human rights and religious freedom.